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SOME PRACTICAL HINTS FOR TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO READ GERMAN

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A most important aim in German instruction in this country is to teach students to read, appreciate, and enjoy the works of German literature. Our efforts must be directed toward developing in them such a facility in covering large amounts easily that they will feel encouraged to continue their reading of German books after they leave our care. They must learn to read German without the mediation of English. To reach this end, we must lay our plans carefully and look not for immediate but ultimate results. By the "translation method" the student will, at first, be able to give a more finished recitation for a particular day, but will gain little of the independence and power necessary for his more mature work. To acquire this independence and power, he must read a great deal and pay particular attention to the content of the books read.¹

Each recitation should begin with a discussion of the subject-matter of the material covered at home. This impresses upon the student the fact that the content of what he reads is the important thing. Frequent practice in translation² is indispensable for the first two years;³ very little translation should then be necessary in the third year and practically none in the fourth. This

¹ For a description of the so-called "Inhalts-Methode," "Contents Method," see article entitled, "In wie weit darf man sich beim Unterricht in der deutschen Sprache des Übersetzens ins Englische bedienen?" in the *Monatshefte für deutsche Sprache und Pädagogik* for January and February, 1908.

² Poetry should never be translated. It should not be taken up until the students are far enough advanced to understand and appreciate it as they read, with only an occasional explanation in German.

³ Careful attention to grammar with a thorough drill on forms is a *sine qua non* of language study. An inductive method of teaching grammar in which a synopsis of forms is given every now and then is the most satisfactory. Constant practice in pronunciation, as well as exercises in conversation, and particularly in composition, are indispensable for a knowledge of any living

translation will provide the student with a basic vocabulary with which to work. But not until he has reached the end of his resources in trying to figure out first the general and then the exact meaning in detail of the passage in question, should he ever be permitted to translate.

For the initial work in the material, the instructor should set, for a lesson in the second and third years, for example, a number of pages, more than the student can translate in less than five or six hours, and request that it merely be read over a couple of times for the subject-matter, with the special provision that no dictionary be used in connection with the work.⁴ At the next meeting of the class, the contents of the pages should be discussed and a part of the same material be set for the following lesson, to be worked over and *translated* as well as possible, still without the aid of a dictionary. A familiar word (or phrase) here and there, be it a German one the student knows, or one that reminds him of an English,⁵ French, or Latin word (or Greek if he is so fortunate as to have studied that language) will give him oftentimes the cue to the general content of the passage. Working from these known words and phrases and the mental picture he draws of what appears to be the situation, he divines the meanings of other words and phrases, and gradually the meaning of the whole will stand out clearer and clearer before his mind.⁶ The classroom exercise would consist in showing the

language. The putting of English into German may be of some help in fixing grammatical details in the student's mind. I am convinced that it does not teach him to express his thoughts in German with any degree of readiness and accuracy, which, after all, is the aim of composition work.

⁴ It does not suffice to say to a class: "Take the next four pages. Read them over first and then translate," for they won't read them first; they will start in at once to translate them. If, on the other hand, you assign the reading for one lesson, forbidding the use of a dictionary, they will gladly do the work as you desire. The translation, as explained farther on, can be left for the following lesson or two.

⁵ A brief exposition of the principles of German word-formation, as well as of the general rules for change of consonants in English and German cognates, would be of considerable value in this work.

⁶ This process cannot be better illustrated than by a passage from Spielhagen's *Hammer und Amboss*, I, 311. It is "gerade wie aus einem Nebelmeer auf das wir von einem hohen Berge herabblicken, hie und da einzelne lichte

students how they could have gotten more with the help of the context and their general knowledge of various subjects. This practice of working out the unknown words from the context, from what they might be expected to mean, is similar to that of supplying words that we fail to catch in ordinary conversation in English.

Now the same passage can be set for exact translation with the aid of a dictionary. After a while it will be possible in addition to such practice to have a large amount read merely for the subject-matter. The first few minutes in class can then be spent on hearing a report of the contents of the reading and the major part of the hour would be left for treatment of new material. The class might devote half of this time to working out the content of several pages and the last half to telling what they had learned, or might even spend most of the hour reading, reserving a few minutes at the close for a written summary of the subject-matter. Time so gained could also be advantageously used in discussing the literary aspects of a work, in explaining some especially difficult syntactical phenomena, in reading aloud, or in German conversations about the text.

In asking for an account of the subject-matter, it is perhaps well to have the principal point in the chapter or pages explained first. Then could follow the less important points in the narrative and then the details which in this way will group themselves around the more important facts and be less troublesome for the students to remember. Accuracy, specific answers to questions must be insisted on. If names and dates are given in the story, let the student get them. Instead of saying "a man" or "a servant," let him say "Karl," instead of her aunt "her aunt Rikchen," etc. Have him know exactly where the scene of the story is laid, what season of the year it is, etc.

The teacher might from time to time translate a considerable

Punkte auftauchen, ein sonnebeschienenes Kornfeld, eine Hütte, ein Stück Weges, ein kleiner See mit grasigen Ufern und endlich die ganze Landschaft klar vor uns liegt, bis auf wenige Stellen, über welchen noch graue Streifen sich breiten, die langsamer als die anderen die Bergschluchten aufwärts ziehen" This passage has of course a very different connection in the novel but, as it expresses figuratively what I wish to make clear, I venture to quote it here.

amount of German rapidly, keeping as close to the order of the German words as is possible and requiring the students to follow the text carefully. They will thus get the meaning without any apparent effort. They have no time to think of the translation of individual words or phrases, to hunt for subject and object, and the German word-order seems less strange and foreign to them. Material that the students have already read and summarized would be excellently adapted for this purpose. They know the general line of thought and will find less difficulty in connecting the exact meaning of the words and sentences, as the instructor translates, with the German text, than would be the case if the material were completely new. A certain amount of text that the class has never seen before should, however, also be treated in this manner. It will require a more rigid concentration of mind to follow a text and then there is the added charm and interest of a new story. To relieve the tension on the minds of the students, and banish all apprehensions that so interfere with a calm and normal brain-action, it is best to announce that the class will not be held responsible at examination time for the translation of pages thus treated, but merely for the subject-matter. To insure strict attention, the instructor can interrupt his reading from time to time and ask a student what he thinks the following word or sentence means, expecting the student to know merely from the word "following" what word or sentence is referred to. Whether it is well to have a class translate now and then a lesson into English in the German order is a matter for the individual instructor to decide. It is of distinct value in developing an appreciation of the spirit of German sentence-structure and in teaching one to read German rapidly and easily, but may have a bad influence on one's English.

The teacher must study his class individually and strive to discover what it is that prevents the individual student from grasping the meaning of a passage quickly. It is usually due to the fact that he has not been taught to think. He is accustomed to turn to a dictionary the moment an unknown word meets his eye, without first wrestling with it until he conquers it, or at least is fully certain that he cannot get at its meaning in any

way other than by looking it up. Infinite patience must be exercised, especially during the first month or so of the term, while the pupils are becoming acquainted with the method. They should not be censured even if they are unable to get any idea whatsoever of the content of a passage at first. The teacher is there to show them how they can get it and the harder it is for them, the more necessary and valuable is the instruction. We must inspire the student with faith in his own ability and also, if possible, establish a relation of friendship and confidence between him and his instructor, that will allow him to do justice to himself on every occasion. The teacher with a sarcastic remark or word of censure ever balanced on his tongue will not get his class to disclose what they really know.

Now for a few examples to illustrate the actual workings of such a method. I take them from classroom exercises. The passages selected for illustration are neither the simplest that could be found, nor necessarily the best adapted for illustration, but they will perhaps serve the purpose in hand. A written description of how such work can be carried on is in the nature of the case unsatisfactory and inadequate. The life of oral instruction cannot be reproduced in written words.

Early in the second semester of a three-hour elementary (first-year) course, the following sight passage came up for treatment in class.

Im ersten Augenblick hätte ich geschworen, der Verbacht sei unbegründet, die Dame schuldlos. Aber als ich ruhiger geworden und manche geheimnisvollen, ja unheimlichen Einzelheiten im Wesen der Dame mir wieder vergegenwärtigte, da stiegen auch in mir schwerwiegende Zweifel an ihrer Schuldlosigkeit auf. Mir schauderte.—A. C. Wiesner, *Die schwarze Dame* (Deutsche Noveletten-Bibliothek, Bernhardt, Vol. I, p. 119).

I asked a student to put on the board the words of the passage, whose meanings he knew.⁷ The list ran:

Im ersten Augenblick hätte ich . . . der . . . sei . . . „ die Dame—los. Aber als ich ruhiger geworden und manche—vollen, ja un—lichen Einzelheiten im . . . der Dame mir wieder . . . , da . . . auch in mir schwer— . . . an ihrer—losigkeit auf. Mir . . .

⁷ Instead of writing the words on the board, the students could be asked to underline them in their books.

This list gave him no inkling as to the contents of the passage other than that the persons concerned were the lady and the writer. The story had already told that the lady's husband had been murdered and that the authorities had put a question to the narrator of the story, which had indicated quite clearly that the lady herself was thought to be the perpetrator of the deed.

The student was asked whether he had never seen the word "Verdacht" and he could not recall having done so. He was then required to read the preceding paragraph, and found the word there. He then recalled its meaning "suspicion." The meanings of "geschworen" and "unbegründet" were arrived at by analyzing them into their component parts and comparing their roots with English words, viz., "ge-schwor-en," swore; "un-be-gründ-et," ungrounded, and, in connection, with the word "Verdacht," unfounded. So he had made out: "In the first moment I would have sworn that the suspicion was unfounded," and he ought now to have thought at once, it would seem, of the meaning of "schuldlos," especially when he knew that the latter half of the word had the force of "lacking in, less." But he had no idea of its meaning, so the question was put to him. "If a friend said to you, 'In the first moment I should have sworn that the suspicion was unfounded, the lady—,' and on account of some noise outside you lost the following word, catching only its latter half, 'less,' what would you naturally supply?" He could not think of the word. So the question was asked him, "If the suspicion was unfounded, what about the lady?" He answered, "She was innocent." Then "guiltless" occurred to him as the word he should have supplied and he translated, "and the lady was guiltless (or better) innocent." He continued the translation, "But when I had become calmer and many . . . on her innocence (he got this word from "schuldlos" which he had just worked out), I shuddered." "Schauderte" was clear to him from its resemblance to the English. "Now the word 'aber,' but, at the beginning of the sentence suggests what?" the student was asked; and, after some reflection, he answered that, on second thought, the man had his doubts. The word "schauderte" helped strengthen this

opinion. Then he was asked which word in the sentence probably meant "doubt" and he said "Zweifel." "And why?" "Because the context 'an ihrer Schuldlosigkeit' seems to require it." Then he was asked whether "Wesen" suggested any German word and he answered, "Yes. gewesen;" "And the noun would be?" "Being." From the following, "der Dame," he thought of a better translation, namely, "character, nature." "'Auf' suggests what as a prefix?" was the next question, and the reply, "Up." He correctly divined that "Einzelheiten," a noun containing the word "ein" (he had forgotten the meaning of "Einzel"), must signify "single facts," "details." "Schwer," heavy, he knew; and now he could make out this much: "But when I had become calmer and many yes details in the character of the lady came back to me again, heavy doubts of her innocence came up in me ('in my mind,' he added). I shuddered." The subject-matter had now been divined and the translation to a large extent worked out by this one student who was about an average man. The class was called on for the meaning of "geheimnisvoll," "unheimlich," "vergegenwärtigte." A few knew "geheimnisvoll," but no one knew the meaning of "unheimlich" or "vergegenwärtigte." When the connection of "vergegenwärtigte" with "die Gegenwart" was suggested, several students called out that "die Gegenwart" signified "the present," and one said directly that the verb must signify "to make present" and so "call to mind." The translation of "unheimlich" had to be given by the instructor. A careful and exact rendering of the lines was now made by a couple of students and we could proceed to the next passage. This exercise had taken considerable time, but had made the class do some hard thinking. After a few such exercises, the student will need little questioning to bring out what he knows and a larger amount of ground can be covered.

In the second semester of a three-hour, second-year course, we took up Heine. As we did not care to confine ourselves to the "Harzreise," we used Buchheim's selections from Heine's prose much as we regretted the abridgment of the "Harzreise" in this edition. The "Harzreise" is the first selection in this book, but as it is the most difficult, we read it last, after we had gained a

feeling for Heine's style. In this second half-year we were able to read everything in this book except some forty pages, i. e., some hundred and seventy pages, as well as Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*, one-hundred and thirty-one pages and Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orleans*, one hundred and seventy-six pages. The same general plan of work as previously indicated was followed. Everything was first read and discussed before any translation was permitted. A large amount of translation was, however, eventually done; all of the "Harzreise," and many other selections in Heine as well as considerable of the *Taugenichts* and some of the *Jungfrau* being so treated. As illustration of the method pursued in class, I will take the passage in Buchheim extending from p. 80, l. 11, to p. 82, l. 5 (*Italien*, "Reisebilder" II).

First the class was asked to read the pages, which they had never seen before, to themselves rapidly and when they had all finished, one student was called upon to tell what he had gotten from the material. His report ran:

Heine felt, in the old city of Trent, as though it were all a dream, as though he had seen all this before, the houses, the old women, the old men and the handsome girls; in fact it all seemed a pretty story which he had read or written. He found himself in the market-place, opposite the ancient cathedral, which he now entered. He speaks of the soft light from the colored windows, of the women on the benches at their prayers, of the contrast between the coolness inside and the fierce heat without. He compares the comfortableness of this church with the lack of comfort of the churches in Protestant North-Germany.

The student had made out the general subject-matter of the passage, but did not know what "Obstfrau" signified other than that it was some kind of a woman. He was also unable to understand the play on words of "Ohrfeige" (p. 81, ll. 4-6): "Vielleicht auch, dacht' ich, ist das ganze wirklich nur ein Traum und ich hätte herzlich gern einen Thaler für eine einzige Ohrfeige gegeben, bloss um dadurch zu erfahren, ob ich wachte oder schlief;" and "Feigen an die Ohren" (ll. 10-12): "Sie begnügte sich damit, mir einige wirkliche Feigen an die Ohren zu werfen." He could not even say what "Feige" meant. Instead of being permitted to look up the words "Obstfrau," "Ohrfeige," and

"Feige" or having them explained by other members of the class, he was asked to read on in the next chapter.

In the first paragraph of this chapter, he made out that Heine met the "Obstfrau" again. "Birnen," p. 83, l. 8, he knew meant "pears;" "Citronen" in the following line, as might have been expected, was taken to signify "citrons" and the word "Orangen" was perfectly clear. "Körbe" had escaped his memory, but the context "Big Körbe with citrons and oranges" showed him the word must mean baskets. Now he had the combination "—woman—pears—baskets of citrons and oranges," and it was clear that "Obstfrau" meant "fruit-woman," "apple-woman." The instructor did not say "yes" or "no" to his explanation of the terms "Citronen" and "Obstfrau," but let him read on through the following paragraph. Here again "Citronen" occurs and in the context, "dass wir die wenigen Citronen, die wir aus Italien bekommen, sehr pressen müssen, wenn wir Punsch machen." The meaning of "Punsch" was clear from its similarity to the English word and from its connection with the expression, "dass wir dann . . . desto mehr Rum zugießen." Now what is pressed to make punch but lemons? Accordingly the student was sure at once that "Citronen" meant lemons, and the fact that the fruit was named with oranges above, and again in the same paragraph, proved this beyond a doubt.

A few lines farther on appears the word "Früchte" and a little farther yet "das einzige reife Obst, das wir haben, sind gebratene Äpfel" occurs. "Reif," ripe, was known, and "Obst" could only mean "fruit" in this connection, as the student correctly divined. Now he was sure that the meaning of "Obstfrau" already surmised, was the proper one.

We retraced our steps to the sentence, p. 81, ll. 8–16; "Obstfrau" being known, the meaning of "Feigen" suggested itself at once. The student really should have known this word at the first reading, as we had had it before, or at least should have figured it out at once from its similarity to the English word.

Now why should this old apple-woman throw figs at Heine? Certainly because of something he had done to offend her, and the word "über" in "über die dicke Obstfrau" suggested to the

student that "hinstolperte" might signify something like "fell." He was asked to pronounce the word aloud and give some rendering other than "fell" that was suggested to him by the sound of the word and he thought at once of "stumbled (over)."

Lines 5-7, "ich hätte schlief," still remained very obscure and the student was requested to translate the sentence beginning with "Vielleicht." He did this as follows: "Perhaps also, I thought, the whole is really only a dream and I would very gladly have given a Thaler for a single to learn by this whether I was awake or asleep. "What should 'Ohrfeige' mean?" was asked. The student pondered for a while. "Something connected with ears," he replied, "for anything connected with figs does not make sense." And what connected with ears would show a man whether he was asleep or awake?" "A box on the ears," he answered. When he was assured that this was the meaning of the word "Ohrfeige," the sentence as well as the whole word-play became at once clear. The word "Ohrfeige" must certainly have occurred before in our reading, but not often; at any rate, it had escaped the student's mind.

By this time the hour was up. The three chapters were set for a home-lesson. The class was requested to translate the pages as well as they could, without consulting a dictionary. At the next meeting of the class, several students were called on to render the passage. The meaning of words they had been unable to work out was supplied by other members of the class and the instructor. The closing exercise of the hour consisted of a careful yet free translation of the lines by the instructor. The work on these few pages had taken up two recitation-hours as well as two hours of home-study. Later in the semester twenty or more pages were at times set for a lesson, the contents being merely discussed, without any attempt being made to work out the meaning of the individual words or sentences.

I will close by giving some testimony of students themselves as to the value they derived from this kind of work. The papers were written during the recitation hour toward the end of the semester last spring in first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year classes. The students were requested to give a frank true state-

ment of what they thought of this method. No definite set of questions was propounded to them as the spontaneous expression of opinions that had developed in their minds in the course of the year was desired. In order to allow them to speak freely and not feel hampered by the fear of making a bad impression on the instructor, the classes were strictly enjoined not to affix their names to their reports. Criticisms of the shortcomings of the method were particularly asked for. If we make all due allowances for the hesitancy of pupils to criticize unfavorably except to one another in private, the results are at least interesting.

Only one out of some sixty papers received was intended for an unqualified condemnation of the method. The reason assigned for preferring the translation method was that "we learn best by forgetting words and then looking them up again in the dictionary." The author of this particular report added that he (or she) "got nothing from our way of treating a German book but the story." Several felt that they experienced a tendency toward inaccuracy in determining the meanings of words, although one of them remarked that he no longer was tempted to "crib." Two students thought they paid too little attention to grammatical details when reading rapidly.

All the rest (fifty-three in number) were favorable. The usual youthful laudatory adjectives, such as valuable, most satisfactory, useful, beneficial, excellent, etc., were of frequent occurrence in the criticisms. But nearly every writer went further than merely to revel in glittering generalities; he expressed his own individual reason for preferring the kind of work we had done. All felt that they got more from this method than from the old translation method. Many stated that they had been skeptical at first, but had been converted. Others emphasized the difficulty of the work at the beginning and the facility they acquired after becoming thoroughly acquainted with the method. One third-year student confessed that at the start he had been unable to get any sense whatsoever from what he read, but that later he could get it all and he even went so far as to affirm that he "can now read German understandingly as fast as he does English." The same statement was on the paper of a second-year student but

with the modification, that he "can read easy German as readily as English."

Many remarked that their German vocabulary increased in size more rapidly when they covered large amounts than when they translated smaller amounts, and what is more, words were remembered better. The dictionary work had the effect of "ruining their memory." A number looked upon the translation method as a benefit to one's English rather than to one's German, and one student asserted that this was not his object in studying German. "The significance of words being caught from their context," as one paper put it, "brings before the mind a picture of the object and not the English equivalent."

Two writers claimed that this work had enabled them to read German references. Eighty per cent. of the students considered the method of particular value in training the mind to think and combine quickly. Several had noticed an improvement in their power of concentration, and a good many drew attention to the fact that they had gained confidence in themselves. One put it that he had lost all fear of new material, that he experienced pleasure in the anticipation of something he had never seen before, that he soon became interested in the narrative and forgot that it was a foreign language that he was reading. Another student expressed himself as follows: "In translating plays, as I formerly did, I had no interest in them whatsoever, whereas in reading them through in German this semester, I was so interested in them that I begrudged every interruption and read them with breathless interest at one sitting. It has given me a desire to read more in German and even re-read what I have read already, whereas, after translating a German book, I have put it in the farthest corner of the bookshelf and vowed never to open it again."

Nearly all spoke of a marked improvement in their ability to read understandingly without translating, and a number added that they could translate at sight even better after this kind of work than after constant translation. Some mentioned that they now thought in German while they read, but that translation forced their thoughts back into English molds. A number felt

that they could appreciate better the relative significance of points in a story, whereas the attention in the translation method was oftentimes drawn away to details and important facts were lost. As one student put it: "My impressions of a book read in this way are much clearer and more comprehensive. . . . It gives me an opportunity to grasp the works in their entirety." Another wrote: "Reading a drama through connectedly gives me a general idea of the whole and I do not get this by translating a few pages a day. I think then of the individual word and not of the whole. I get the atmosphere of a drama by reading it through rapidly. It is almost as though it were being presented on the stage. If one does not know every word's specific meaning, he can't help feeling its significance in connection with the rest."

Some papers mentioned that by reading so much more of the works of an author, Schiller in this instance, they got a broader view of his activity and learned to "love him." A good many had acquired some feeling for the beauties of linguistic expression, for style, that translating had not developed. Nearly everyone remarked that he found reading German more enjoyable and felt such a strong interest in the language that he desired to go deeper into it. Several were sufficiently encouraged to pick up German magazines in the reading-room of the library and read them for pleasure, and two had read books during the year that were not required for the course. Some students from each of the four years' classes announced their intention of reading German books during the ensuing summer. In fact a greater interest in German life and literature had been awakened in almost every case.

Are not these the results we are striving for in the teaching of German reading?